

The Country Doctor at the Remick Museum



By Bob Cottrell



Father, c. 1900
Dr. Edwin Remick

The Remick Country Doctor Museum and Farm honors two generations of country doctors, father and son, who practiced medicine in Tamworth, New Hampshire for ninety-nine consecutive years, from 1894 to 1993. Dr. Edwin Remick and his son Dr. Edwin Crafts Remick were the last two generations of a branch of the Remick family that settled in Tamworth in the late 18th century. Their ancestors were farmers, carpenters and store keepers.

The first Dr. Remick was born in Tamworth in 1866. He received his early education first at the town school in Tamworth and then at Fryeburg and Northwood Academies. In 1894 he graduated from the University of Vermont Medical School and began his practice when he returned to Tamworth that same year.

The second Doctor Remick was born in Tamworth in 1903 and received his early education here. This was followed by studies at The Holderness School, Brewster Academy, premedical studies at the University of New Hampshire, and graduation in 1929 from Tufts Medical School.

Overcoming his father's early opposition to his entering the medical profession on account of the long hard hours, and despite the opportunity to practice at Phillips Exeter Academy, young Edwin chose to join his father in Tamworth. He passed the state medical boards in 1929. In 1929-30 he interned at Laconia Hospital and continued to see patients there for many years. From 1929 to 1935 father and son practiced medicine together in the family home.



Son, 1929
Dr. Edwin Crafts Remick

After more than forty years as a physician, the first Dr. Remick died suddenly in his son's arms of a heart attack on June 2, 1935 after completing a full workday. Dr. Edwin Crafts Remick continued the practice almost until his last day at 89 years in 1993.

Nurses and Assistants

The doctors did not work alone. They were aided in their practice by hardworking and dedicated nurses and assistants. Dr. Edwin Crafts Remick had several full-time nurses in his employ. "When his patients came down with pneumonia he would first visit them to confirm their ailment, but then a team of two nurses would be dispatched to the home where they would live and attend to the needs of the patient round-the-clock until recovery was complete."¹

The nurses and assistants working in the doctor's office did everything from scheduling appointments to packaging pills. Dr. Remick's commitment to his patients carried over to his nurses who worked as many extra hours as he.

Gertrude Seiders worked for the first doctor as a nurse until he died. She continued working for the second doctor until her death in 1985, completing 55 years of service between father and son. Gertrude's niece, Earline Wright, worked for the second doctor from 1983 until his death in 1993. She was instrumental in establishing the museum and served as one of the founding members of the board of trustees. Many of Gertrude and Earline's family members also found their calling in the nursing field.



Nurse Gertrude Seiders, in training, Portland, Me., 1923

Our curator, Geraldine Eldridge (Gerry) worked as the second doctor's assistant for thirty years until he died. Gerry's association with the doctor actually began in 1936 when he charged \$6.00 for delivering her as a baby. Together, Gerry and Earline began work on the medical history project in the mid 1980's, sorting Remick family objects in the attic. Their first public open house was in 1987. Gerry's sister, Winnie Mitchell, performed a variety of jobs for the doctor and is now our assistant curator. Dave Eldridge worked the doctor's land for many years and carries on his service as our farm manager. The longevity of their employment echoes the remarkable story of continuity set by the father and son doctor team.

Highlights of Continuity and Change

Over a period of nearly a century, the two doctors saw many changes in the methods of procuring and preparing medicines, in surgical techniques, anesthesia, vaccines and antibiotics, and even doctor's fees from potatoes to the HMO.

From the early days of the first Dr. Remick's practice in 1894 until the end of the second Dr. Remick's practice in 1993, medicine saw a dramatic transformation. Doctors' and nurses' roles changed largely from making a patient comfortable to being able to cure him or her. Vaccinations were developed steadily throughout the 20th century, and epidemics like diphtheria, typhoid, smallpox, and polio were virtually wiped out in the United States. Penicillin, first used to treat patients in 1939, made it possible to cure those destined only years before to lose an infected limb or die of sepsis. Preventive medicine became the goal of the second Dr. Remick who remarked, "The standard approach was then [1930's] to treat the illness, now it's to prevent it from occurring in the first place. Preventative medicine makes things easier for me and is less money for my patients."²



Dr. Edwin Crafts Remick and cabbage, 1985

One thing that has certainly changed over the years is the cost of medical treatment as we can see in the old medical account books. In 1902 the first doctor charged 25 cents for pulling a tooth. He charged 50 cents for office calls and \$1.00 for a house call. After midnight, the rate for a house call went up to \$2.00.

Payment for both doctors was often made in the form of products or services. In 1918 for example, the first doctor settled one person's account in exchange for washing and sweeping. The second doctor was paid in everything from cabbages to cupcakes.

In 1993, the year the second Dr. Remick died, he charged \$17.15 for an office visit and \$30.85 for a house call. Dr. Remick was well-known for spending time with his patients.

Nurse Earline Wright recalled, "no matter how many patients he had, he never made you feel uncomfortable or in a hurry."³

The House Call

For both of the Doctors Remick, house calls were a major part of their practice. "Conditions were never too severe for any call, however remote, to be neglected," according to the elder Dr. Remick's obituary.

House calls, though more expensive, allowed patients to rest and recuperate in the comfort and familiarity of their own home. During the first Dr. Remick's time, babies were delivered at home. One resident recalled that he attended the birth of "about all the people that's living around here now."⁴

Visiting the patient in his own surroundings strengthened the doctor-patient relationship as the doctor learned more about the patient and his family as people. The Doctors Remick provided care, not just for individuals within families, but also multiple generations of the same family in the Tamworth area.

Transportation

While the practice of making house calls remained constant, the methods of transportation were regularly updated, from horse-drawn buggy to Buick and with snow shoes, skis, snowmobiles and horse-drawn sleigh in between.

The elder Dr. Remick's practice covered not only Tamworth, but many of the neighboring towns as well. Frequently, he would stay for extended periods of time with critically ill patients or while waiting for a baby to arrive.

In summer, he drove a horse and buggy. On night calls his horse could be depended upon to head for home unguided in case the doctor fell asleep. In the winter, he drove special horse-drawn sleighs with extra wide runners to provide better traction on icy roads, or in deep snow. Under the seat was a large container for hot water to help keep his feet warm and prevent the liquid medicines under the seats from freezing. Instead of plowing the roads in those days, the roads were rolled with heavy wooden drums pulled by oxen or horses to pack the snow so sleighs could move about more easily.



Breaking the roads with the snow roller, winter of 1925.

In the mid 1920s, he hired a driver and an early version of a snowmobile from White's Garage in West Ossipee. These snowmobiles, invented by Virgil White and John Hayford, were modified Model T Fords with runners that replaced the front tires and tractor tread type rear wheels. The second doctor was heard to say, "It had quite a lot of speed...It would go 25-30 miles per hour over drifts or anywhere!"⁵



The elder Dr. Remick in his 1917 Ford.
Note the tool box fastened to the running board,
it contains his medical supplies.

During one winter epidemic of influenza in Tamworth and Sandwich, the senior doctor had to make most of his house calls on snowshoes. For three days and nights he did not have his clothes off.

In the winter of 1929-1930 the town began plowing the roads, permitting the doctors to make house calls in regular automobiles. Dr. Edwin Crafts Remick owned a series of black Fords and Chevrolets until World War II. After the war, he began his trading black Buicks every year. He drove them an average of 50,000 miles a year. He was also well known for being a "lead foot," although he used to say that the medical insignia attached to his car prevented him from getting a ticket.

Office Visit

The story of the Remicks' medical practice is closely tied to the museum's houses and farm. Both kept an office in what is now called the Captain Enoch Remick House. Built around 1800 and named for one of the doctors' ancestors, the house is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The use of a house for office indicates a certain Yankee frugality, comfort and familiarity.

One of the interesting adaptations to the house for the medical practice is a metal speaking tube which runs from the outside of the front door upstairs to the doctor's bedroom. Late one night, the tube was used to wake Dr. Edwin Remick for an emergency. On his way down the stairs, the groggy doctor fell, breaking his arm, thereby having to attend to both himself and the anxious patient, whose "emergency" did not compare with that of the doctor.



Dr. Edwin Crafts Remick, c. 1930, in front of what
is now called Capt. Enoch Remick House.

Both doctors used the parlor for a waiting room until one of the patients was caught with his feet on the piano. After this, the second doctor used the stair hall as the waiting room. A small vestibule over the front door provided extra seats for patients during the summer. Inside, the patients would sit along the wall in chairs. Others would simply wait on the stairs.

The practice consisted of three more rooms: the “little office,” “big office,” and the medicine room. The little office was actually a small hallway used for minor procedures—sore throats were looked at and sutures or fish hooks were removed. In the room stood a safe used by both doctors as well as a closet with a dumb waiter, dating back to the period the building was used as an inn.

In the big office, both doctors performed everything from a detailed physical examination to minor surgery. A curtained-off area for changing and Indian shutters provided privacy. Here some of the younger doctor’s personal interests were on display, such as photos of his beloved racehorses, Red Sox baseball team souvenir photos and memorabilia. Many patients recollect how he would play them a tape of a favorite pacer winning a race.

The last room was referred to as the medicine room. Because there weren’t many pharmacies around, both doctors carried their own medicines. The doctor’s assistant would count out the pills, package them up, and the patient would be on his way. Hand-painted murals peeking out behind shelves in cabinets here are reminders of the house’s tavern days.



Highland Hall and Dr. Edwin C. Remick on the right, Gorham, Me. 1958



Dr. Edwin C. Remick visits with his cows.

The Farming Life

Like many country doctors of his era, Edwin Crafts Remick farmed his land. A well-equipped milk house on the property is evidence of his success at dairy farming. From 1933 through 1937, the doctor served as the part-time physician for Tamworth’s Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camp. The government required that the men be served pasteurized milk. Since no area dairy provided this, the doctor augmented the dairy herd his father had begun, purchased the needed equipment, and opened the first pasteurizing plant north of Rochester, New Hampshire. He called the dairy Hillsdale Farm and operated it for about thirty years. This economic opportunity fit in well with his interest in sanitation and health and his love of farming.

Today the Remick Country Doctor Museum and Farm makes accessible the offices and living space of both Doctors Edwin Remick. Their medical equipment, from black bags to fishbone removers to baby scales, is on exhibit. With advance notice, visitors may have the good fortune to take a tour given by a former long-time office assistant of the second doctor.

About the Author:

Robert Cottrell is a graduate of the Winterthur program at the University of Delaware and has been working in the museum field since 1982. He is director of the Remick Country Doctor Museum and Farm. He has worked in Sarasota and St. Petersburg, Florida and Conner Prairie in Indiana. He has also taught in Ankara, Turkey.

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¹ Kevin Early, “After 60 years as a country doctor, Edwin Remick is still going strong,” *Northern Light* December 8, 1987, p.3.

² Kevin Early, p. 3.

³ Robert Cottrell, director. *The Remick Museum: Past, Present and Future*, videotape, 1997.

⁴ David Ruell, "Tamworth's Country Doctors," *Foster's Sunday Citizen*, November 9, 2003, p. 8E.

⁵ Joan Casarotto, "From Horse and Buggy to Big Black Buick," from *Tamworth, N.H. Celebrates*, Tamworth Constitutional Bicentennial Commission, Conway, N.H., 1987.

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